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UN Forum on Minorities

Agenda Item 4

Conditions required for effective political participation

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Madame Chairperson,

I would like to address the subject of conditions required for the effective participation of minorities in institutions of global governance.

Political opportunities in the domestic sphere often are blocked or ineffective for minority actors. In an effort to open these domestic political spaces, minority actors use spaces in the international sphere to engage in political dialogue with their own state actors, international organisations and other states. In the halls of international governance structures, barriers of discrimination can be less institutionalised, opportunities for dialogue with state actors can be more open and mobilisation among minority communities can be stronger.

Minorities also are often affected differently by challenges faced in the global commons. For example, environmental degradation can cause further harm to minorities who face environmental racism domestically. Minority participation in decision-making over solutions to these global problems is often weak. They typically are not invited to make recommendations based on their own experience and expertise that would help address these global problems – for example, minority actors could advise on strategies to ensure that responses to the global economic crisis take account of discrimination and its impact on limiting access to financial services by minorities.

Minority actors are often excluded from existing civil society participation structures in global governance. In the Central American Free Trade Agreement, for example, a civil society consultation mechanism was created but Afro-descendants were not given a seat until they mobilised to demand one.

In the UN, there has been decreasing space for consideration of minority issues. While the UN Voluntary Fund for Indigenous Peoples has had some US\$ 4.1 million in voluntary contributions from states and other actors over the period 1992-2007, there has been no corresponding Fund for minorities.¹ The UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues meets for 10 working days per year, the UN Forum on Minorities for 2 working days. The recent Durban Review Conference had extremely limited funds for civil society participation and no official NGO forum.

¹ See <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/about/funds/indigenous/> (accessed 6 March 2009).

Madame chair,

I would like to offer some recommendations on how to strengthen mechanisms for minority participation in the spaces of global governance:

1. Structures of global governance that engage with civil society should ensure that minority groups are able to participate in decision-making that will affect them; for example, the UNDP Civil Society Advisory Committee could, in addition to the current indigenous actor, include also other minority actor representatives.
2. Encourage states and other donors to provide adequate resources to a UN Voluntary Fund for Minorities and to create similar structures at the regional level for engagement in regional organisations like the OAS, ASEAN, SAARC or the OSCE to enable minority actors to participate in global governance structures whose decisions affect them
3. Governments should be encouraged to create bilateral or regional structures for cooperation on issues of concern to minorities who exist across borders, either for reasons of migration or kin groups.

In the words of one minority actor from Iran, these international spaces are vital for facilitating 'voices of moderation', particularly where domestic politics are blocked, and such space can enable minority groups to be subjects - not objects - in international society.